

March 4, 2022

Esteemed Chairs Lemar and Haskell,  
Members of the Transportation Committee:

The Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the following bills:

- Senate Bill 215, *An Act Concerning the Development of a Transportation Engineering Recruitment Program*. WestCOG **supports** actions that will ensure an adequate supply of talent to maintain and improve the state's transportation system. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) constitutes a historic increase in transportation funding – with an equal increase in the need for transportation professionals. At the same time, a wave of retirements – the so-called 'silver tsunami' – is expected to impact the Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT) particularly hard, with up to 40% of staff retiring in some areas. Many new hires will be needed to sustain and, in line with IIJA, accelerate investment into the state's transportation system. Unfortunately, the state's colleges and universities are not producing enough new graduates to fill even half the need for transportation professionals.

SB 215 may help attract more students into transportation programs, which is important, but it will not alone lead more talent to DOT or help the Department do more given its capacity constraints. To this end, WestCOG suggests that you consider:

1. Recruitment process reform, with broad advertising of current and expected vacancies, recognition of professional licenses from other jurisdictions, a shorter timetable to hire, and flexibility and incentives.
  2. Increased use of technology to raise productivity.
  3. Delegation of responsibility for local and regional programs and projects to the regional councils of governments, so that DOT resources may focus on major state concerns. LOTCIP is a successful example of such delegation that could be extended into additional phases of project development (design, rights-of-way, construction) and to programs similar in scale (e.g., Community Connectivity, Local Bridge Program).
  4. Dedicated grant writers, so that scarce engineering talent can do what it trained to do, and the state can maximize competitiveness under IIJA's discretionary programs, which could net the state an additional \$2 billion. If grant writing is not a core DOT function, grant writers could be housed at the COGs, which are well-positioned for this role.
- Senate Bill 216, *An Act Concerning the Expansion of Passenger Rail Service on the Waterbury Branch of the Metro-North Commuter Railroad*. WestCOG broadly supports expansions of passenger rail service. However, it is unclear as to how the Waterbury branch could be expanded to Derby, Seymour, and Shelton. All three towns currently are served by the Waterbury branch; indeed, service on the line dates back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

**WestCOG suggests that any expansions of service be directed to municipalities that are on a rail line and seek but do not currently have passenger service.** WestCOG asks that your Committee examine adding service to:

1. Georgetown. Passenger service to Georgetown is key to the redevelopment of the Gilbert and Bennett Wire Mill. The region has been seeking to convert this large complex at the quadripoint of Redding, Ridgefield, Weston, and Wilton into a diverse mixed-use transit-oriented community, with strong employment and affordable housing components. Passenger rail is necessary to make this exciting and equitable project work.
  2. Brookfield Four Corners. Substantial public and private investment has been directed in the last several years into transforming an obsolete highway strip into a town center. Passenger rail would turbocharge this project, building on existing momentum, and provide a model for the retrofit of vibrant human-scale town centers in suburban areas throughout the state.
  3. Downtown New Milford. The downtown developed around passenger rail. While the historic architecture and downtown form has been well preserved, the loss of passenger rail limits the area from achieving its full potential as an economic center and a transit hub for southern Litchfield County.
- House Bill 5258, *An Act Concerning Moving over when Approaching Certain Emergency Vehicles*. Under the bill, drivers must “immediately reduce speed to twenty miles per hour” when approaching an emergency vehicle that is stopped or traveling slowly on a highway. While the bill appears to be aimed at improving the safety for emergency responders, an immediate drop from highway speeds to 20 mph creates safety hazards of its own. Consistent with this, the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices calls for, and states install, a reduced speed limit ahead signs (W3-5) where the speed limit drops by more than 10 mph. State law should support reductions in speed that are careful and safe.
  - House Bill 5257, *An Act Establishing a Municipal Grant for Road Signs to Promote Road Safety*. WestCOG supports the intent of this bill. However, road signs are often inexpensive, with a stop sign, for instance, typically costing around \$50. WestCOG is concerned about the efficiency of providing such micro-grants – administrative costs may exceed grant amounts – and adding to DOT’s plate when the Department faces capacity constraints due to retirements and an increase in workload. Your Committee may wish to evaluate alternative mechanisms to fund road safety in municipalities, including linking road safety investments to the Regional Transportation Safety Plans created by the councils of governments.
  - House Bill 5256, *An Act Studying the Consolidation of Local and Regional Transit Districts*. WestCOG suggests that the bill include:
    1. Harmonization in addition to consolidation of transit districts. Customer experience and ridership may be able to be enhanced rapidly, flexibly, and at low cost through harmonization; this option should also be explored. For information about this option, see [Verkehrsverbund: How Germany Standardizes Transit Customer Experience](#) –

Stewart Mader and Verkehrsverbund: The evolution and spread of fully integrated regional public transport in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland: International Journal of Sustainable Transportation: Vol 13, No 1 ([tandfonline.com](http://tandfonline.com)).

2. Transit district and council of governments representatives, given the subject matter.
3. Consideration of transit systems not operated by transit districts. These systems, which include CTtransit and passenger rail (Amtrak, CTrail, Metro-North), do not exist in isolation and should be considered in the evaluation of regional transportation options and efficiencies HB 5256 proposes.

Lastly, the language in the bill may be duplicate of CGS §13b-4(9), which reads:

*“Sec. 13b-4. Powers and duties of commissioner. The commissioner shall have the following general powers, duties and responsibilities: ... (9) To prepare a plan setting forth a recommendation for a restructured system of regional transit districts within the state. Said plan shall be based on: (A) Established patterns of commuter traffic within the state; (B) federal requirements for receiving aid under the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964; and (C) present planning regions. On or before February 1, 1978, the commissioner shall present such plan to the General Assembly”*

Your Commission may wish to consider reconciling or striking this as part of HB 5256.

Should you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Francis Pickering", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Francis R. Pickering  
Executive Director